

The City as a Symbol of Paralysis and Stagnation in James Joyce's Short Story Collection *Dubliners*

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Abstract: Sometimes we feel that a city has become a symbol of its cultural and social practices. Paris is known for its fashion industry while Mumbai is known for its Hindi cinema industry. Hyderabad is known for its biryani while Lucknow has been known for its “tameez” and “tehzeeb.” Varanasi and Haridwar have held their positions as religious centres. All these examples are of cities as a symbol of social practices. In the same way Joyce presents the dominant socio-political, cultural and religious practices of the capital city of Ireland in the early part of the twentieth century. In the collection *Dubliners*, Dublin is portrayed as a city which is marred by paralysis-both physical and psychological, moral corruption, alcoholism, religious corruption, stagnation in life, domestic violence etc.

Keywords: Paralysis, stagnation, alcoholism, corruption, domestic violence.

This paper is a discourse dealing with certain common behavioural, social and cultural characteristics of men and women portrayed in the short story collection *Dubliners* written by James Joyce. These particular examples derived from the text can be used as an evidence to decipher the general tendency of the people of Dublin in the contemporary time. First published in June 1914, *Dubliners* is a collection of fifteen short stories dealing with contemporary issues concerning Ireland. The stories are a realistic description of middle-class life in Dublin in the early part of the twentieth century. The issues considered in this paper are- alcoholism, corruption, search for national identity and purpose, paralysis-both physical and psychological, hopelessness, role of religion, epiphany-moment where a character goes through a life changing illumination, selfishness, and domestic violence. Richard Ellman has noted that Joyce “makes the reader feel uneasy and culpable if he misses the intended but always unstated meaning, as if he were being arraigned rather than entertained.”

Best known for his *Ulysses* (1922) James Joyce was born in Dublin in a middle-class family. In 1904 he left Dublin and moved to continental Europe with his wife Nora Barnacle. With Barnacle, he lived in Italy, France and Switzerland. Although most of his adult life was spent outside of Ireland, his fictional world still remained focused on Dublin. His characters closely resemble his family members and others known to him. After the publication of *Ulysses*, he stated, “For myself, I always write about Dublin, because if I can get to the heart of Dublin I can get to the heart of all the cities of the world. In the particular is contained the universal.”

Joyce presents the city of Dublin in the light of his personal experiences. Dublin becomes a metaphor, a symbol, a figure to present the contemporary life of Irish men and women residing in the capital town of Ireland. James Joyce himself once wrote, "I call the series *Dubliners* to betray the soul of that . . . paralysis which many consider a city." Joyce believed passionately that Irish culture and society had been frozen in their place for centuries by two dominant forces: the Roman Catholic Church and England. The result of such oppression was that Ireland became one of the poorest and least developed countries in all of Western Europe. Thus images of paralysis recur throughout the collection obsessively and without mercy. In the first story of *Dubliners* "The Sisters" the narrator uses the word "paralysis" in order to express his emotions:

Every night as I gazed up at the window I said softly to myself the word paralysis. It had always sounded strangely in my ears, like the word gnomon in the Euclid and the word simony in the Catechism. But now it sounded to me like the name of some maleficent and sinful being. It filled me with fear, and yet I longed to be nearer to it and to look upon its deadly work. (Joyce 2)

The city of Dublin becomes a pivot point in the short story collection around which Joyce spins the web of his stories. Dublin suffers from paralysis, that is, it has lost the ability to move on its own. The habitants of the city are not able to take their own course of life. The desire to escape remains but the will to follow through the desire remains absent. There is desire to do something greater, achieve something higher and most importantly to flee away from the city. But none happens as the characters suffer from lack of will to do so. Rev. James Flynn in the story "The Sisters" suffers from paralysis- both physical and psychological. He confides in Eliza, his sister, the desire to visit their ancestral house in "one of them new-fangled carriages that makes no noise" (6). His desire remains unfulfilled as he dies peacefully in his home.

Religion according to Joyce was overestimated by Irishmen and Joyce left not even a single chance to ridicule it. In the first story of the *Dubliners*, "The Sisters" Mr. Cotter puts forward his point of view about children spending time with an old priest: "'What I mean is,' said old cotter, 'it's bad for children. My Idea is: Let a young lad run about and play with young lads of his own age...'" (Joyce 3). Eliza confesses to the aunt of the narrator the burdens of priesthood which Rev. Flynn was carrying on his old shoulders: "The duties of the priesthood was too much for him. And Then his life was, you might say, crossed" (6).

In story after story in *Dubliners* it appears that Joyce holds the Roman Catholic Church accountable for the failure of Irish to advance in step with the rest of the Europe and gain its independence. He was particularly bitter about the way in which the Church often recruited intellectuals like himself to serve in the priesthood rather than encouraging them to use their minds in the service of progress, as doctors, scientists, or political members.

An example of this is in the first story of *Dubliners*, "The Sisters," in which religion plays a large role. The story centres around a priest named Father Flynn whose home the narrator frequented. The narrator in "The Sisters" remains nameless, which may suggest that his

experience in the story is not limited to any single person. The narrator's experience in the story is a common experience for the people of Dublin at the turn of the twentieth century. In other words, the image that Joyce employs within the very first story-being a realistic view of Dublin life, carry on throughout *Dubliners* and affects every character in a similarly unpleasant way, just as they did when Joyce lived in Dublin.

“An Encounter,” the second story in the collection is an account of three friends who plan to bunk off school to see the Pigeon House. The narrator feels the need to experience real adventure which he cannot experience under the restraining influence of school:

But when the restraining influences of the school was at a distance I began to hunger again for wild sensations, for the escape which those chronicles of disorder alone seemed to offer me. The mimic warfare of the evening became at last wearisome to me as the routine of school in the morning because I wanted real adventures to happen to myself. But real adventures, I reflected, do not happen to people who remain at home: they must be sought abroad. (8)

Leo Dillon, the narrator and a boy named Mahony save sixpence in order to flee school to go see the Pigeon House. But even in this small trivial revolt against the monotony of school Leo Dillon did not show up, a trait of behaviour showed by a number of Dubliners. The will and courage to follow through their desire remains absent. Adventurous spirit remains absent in the people of Dublin. Leo Dillon was afraid that he might meet Father Butler or someone from the school as the narrator puts it: “Leo Dillon was afraid we might meet Father Butler or someone out of the college; but Mahony asked, very sensibly, what Father Butler be doing out at the Pigeon House” (8). The day's adventure went on without Leo Dillon. Mahony expresses his desire to escape on one of the vast ships, a desire to escape the mundane life of his city and school and to travel far away from it:

Mahony said it would be right skit to run away to sea on one of those big ships and even I, looking at the high masts, saw, or imagined, the geography which had been scantily dosed to me at school gradually taking substance under my eyes. School and home seemed to recede from us and their influences upon us seemed to wane. (9)

Even a small adventurous journey to the Pigeon House results in an utter failure. The narrator and Mahony got late and were not able to see the Pigeon House. The characters involved are unable to achieve their goal of fleeing school and visiting the Pigeon House. The narrator states,

It was too late and we were too tired to carry out our project of visiting the Pigeon House. We had to be home before four o' clock lest our adventure should be discovered. Mahony looked regretfully at his catapult and I had to suggest going home by train before he regained any cheerfulness. (10)

Religion seems to play an important role in the story. Religion, in the story is seen as a controlling force rather than a guiding force. Any transgression in the way of life dictated by the clergymen is not tolerated. Even the choice of books one reads comes under its grasp. Father Butlers chastises one of his students about his choice of books:

“What is this rubbish?” he said. “The Apache Chief ! Is this what you read instead of studying your Roman History? Let me not find any more of this wretched stuff in this college. The man who wrote it, I suppose, was some wretched fellow who writes these things for a drink. I’m surprised boys like you, educated, reading such stuff. (8)

The unnamed narrator of the story “Araby” who is infatuated with Mangan’s sister suffers from the same psychological paralysis like most other characters in *Dubliners*. In a moment of epiphany he gives up his desire of buying a gift for Mangan’s sister as he puts it: “Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger” (Joyce 16). The story contains some passages which are a commentary on the contemporary lifestyle in Dublin. The narrator bribes his way to get entry into the fair. This is indicative of the corruption prevalent in Dublin. The narrator puts it: “I could not find any sixpenny entrance and, fearing that the bazaar would be closed, I passed in quickly through a turnstile, handing a shilling to a weary-looking man” (15). Narrator’s uncle in the story talks to himself when he returns home. This implies that he has a drinking problem. Alcoholism was prevalent in contemporary Dublin and the fact itself is exemplified in the story by narrator’s uncle drinking and talking to himself. The narrator creates a world of fantasy for himself where he loves Mangan’s sister and desires to be with her. He describes his feelings for her at the beginning of the story:

When she came out on the doorstep my heart leaped. I ran to the hall, seized my books and followed her. I kept her brown figure always in my eye and, when we came near the point at which our ways diverged, I quickened my pace and passed her. This happened morning after morning. I had never spoken to her, except for a few casual words, and yet her name was like summons to all my foolish blood. (13)

Dublin seems to be afflicted with a disease of failure and even in a trivial task of reaching the bazaar at time the narrator of “Araby” fails and is unable to achieve the illusory happiness of youth.

The first female protagonist of *Dubliners* Eveline in the story “Eveline” is also lost in a world of fantasy where she can find happiness. Desire for love and love for distant lands are to be seen in the character of Eveline. In “Araby” and as well as “Eveline” the protagonists are unable to achieve their goals. For Eveline everyday drudgery has become a habit and a regime which she cannot escape. Violence against women and children is clearly seen in the story which is a reality of contemporary Dublin. Domestic violence and alcoholism can be seen as a part of city’s social and cultural existence. Eveline’s father’s home provides two essential elements of survival- food and shelter but inner satisfaction and happiness is missing from Eveline’s life

which she seeks in her love affair with Frank who promises to take her away to Argentina as the narrator puts it: “She was about to explore another life with Frank. Frank was very kind, manly, open-hearted. She was to go away with him by the night-boat to be his wife and to live with him in Buenos Ayres where he had a home waiting for her” (18).

Materialism and lust for wealth as a way of life in contemporary Dublin can be seen in the story “Eveline” in building of houses at a spot where children used to play:

One time there used to be a field there in which they used to play every evening with other people’s children. Then a man from Belfast bought the field and built houses in it not like their little brown houses but bright brick houses with shining roofs. The children of the avenue used to play together in that field-the Devines, the Waters, the Dunns, little Keogh the cripple, she and her brothers and sisters. (16)

Not only does it betray desire and lust for money but it also shows affinity towards artificial and cosmetic way of life where men trade their small traditional homes for small cramped spaces.

Distant place and unknown land offers Eveline a hope for a new life with inner happiness and satisfaction which she cannot enjoy in Dublin. Frank offers hope not only for love but also for a new life:

But in her new home, in a distant unknown country, it would be not like that. Then she would be married-she, Eveline. People would treat her with respect then. She would not be treated as her mother had been. Even now, though she was over nineteen, she sometimes felt herself in danger of her father’s violence. (17)

Eveline’s choice is ironical. Though she did not want her to be treated like her mother, her choice at the end is to remain in Dublin and live with her family.

What is common in all these stories is that the trials which the protagonists face are entirely monetary. The narrator of “Araby” saves money in order to go the bazaar while the female protagonist of “Eveline” works hard to earn money which her father takes away from her as her father fears that she will squander away the money. Every Saturday is known for a quarrel between Eveline and her father as Eveline is not able to extract enough money to buy provisions to feed the family. Joyce felt the Irish people were stuck and Eveline is a good example of this fixation. Though unhappy and overworked, she is unable to break the promise she made to her mother on her deathbed that she would keep the family and household together. Fear of the unknown and the promise made to her mother is what keeps her from not going to Argentina with Frank. She is psychologically sabotaged because she cannot choose and by not choosing she is caught up in her mundane unhappy mechanical life of an automaton.

Preoccupation with adventure resurfaces as a theme in the story “After The Race”. Adventure stimulates excitement but only temporarily while in the meantime hard earned family

wealth earned by Jimmy's father in the butcher trade is lost irresponsibly in a game of cards which Jimmy did not understand. Jimmy is gullible and tries to fit in into the affluent class. By having Jimmy lose at the game of cards, Joyce seems to be showing that no matter how hard the Irish try to fit in with the other European countries, they will always come up short. Jimmy's ultimate motive is to gain the favour of others in which he fails miserably. Jimmy suffers from paralysis which is of a different kind- it is paralysis in the form of failure to succeed in professional life. His life did not move forward. Instead of earning more money, he loses it at a card game. Jimmy was educated in England and at Protestant, Anglo-centric Trinity College in Dublin. As in earlier stories, Joyce blames the English for Irish paralysis whenever he can.

In the story "A Boarding House" Joyce uses colours (brown and yellow) to symbolise decay and paralysis. An instance of Joyce using colour (yellow) to highlight the state of paralysis is the gilt clock that Mrs. Mooney looks at when she is waiting for Bob to come and have a talk with her. Polly, Mrs. Mooney's daughter also suffers from paralysis. Polly's ultimate goal in life is to become independent and free herself from the controlling influence of her mother. She ventures forth-to her typist's job at the corn factor's-only to return home without achieving her goal. Her life is a symbol of stagnancy.

There is a substantial link between the priest from "The Sisters" and Mrs. Mooney. The priest commits simony, selling the offices of the church for money, and Mrs. Mooney sells her daughter (among other ways that she is portrayed as cheap). The priest, who is "stained" and "crossed" should not be administering any holy advice or orders with his empty chalice (metaphorical (his own vacant spirituality) and literal (the cup without wine)), and yet he continues to do so; Mrs. Mooney, herself of a poor marriage choice, entraps a man for her daughter by utilizing feigned outrage and the pretence of offence – neither of which are her accurate feelings. Mrs. Mooney's "decisive expression" of satisfaction mirrors the priest's laughter in the confessional.

In the story "A Little Cloud" Little Chandler's personal growth is stunted which becomes a symbol of stagnancy resulting in frustration, resentment and a sense of paralysis. He is called "Little" Chandler because "although he was but slightly under the average stature he gave one the idea of being a little man" (35). He sits in a "little room" by a "little lamp" and is described as having "childish white teeth" and "small hands". Envious of Gallaher's success, he blames his lack of success in his career on his not having left Ireland. Later he blames his marriage too for his failure and dreams of escaping his "little house". He even considers changing his name- an escape from his real identity. He dreams of a career as a poet but there is no indication that he has ever written a poem. When his child's crying makes it impossible for him to read Byron and interrupts his dream of becoming a poet, he experiences an epiphany, recognising that he will never be able to change his life, but will remain trapped in a cycle of wishing for a change remaining psychologically beaten and paralysed.

"The Dead," final and the longest story in the collection *Dubliners* is a commentary on contemporary Dublin. Alcoholism, fear of failure, actual failure (in the form of a failed

marriage), craving for unconditional and spiritual love, question of loving one's own language—all are addressed in the story. The story itself becomes a model, the characters being stereotypical version of the people of Dublin while the collection *Dubliners* becomes a symbol and a figure which the readers use as an evidence to decipher the characteristics of men and women residing in contemporary Dublin.

There are a number of parallels between the first and the last story, “The Sisters” and “The Dead,” including the theme of life and death, the aging spinster sisters, and the criticism of the paralyzed Catholic Church (Father Flynn’s paralysis, both physical and spiritual, and the image in “The Dead” of the monks sleeping in their coffins, almost like “living dead”). In “The Sisters”, the narrator perceives the priest’s death as liberating, while in “The Dead,” Gretta’s memory of her long dead former lover leads to Gabriel’s painful but hopeful epiphany. The physical presence of Father Flynn’s corpse contrasts with long-buried Michael Furey’s body whose memory Gretta has kept in her heart for so many years. Paralysis of an unfulfilled marriage, but hope in Gabriel’s realisation of this, the realisation that his wife’s thoughts and feelings were not in line with his own thoughts. It is an epiphany that leads to some soul searching, leaving the reader hopeful that Gabriel will now be inspired to consider his marriage from a deeper, bilateral and spiritual point of view. The frozen winter is symbolic of the paralysis of the protagonist and the country as a whole, but this time the metaphor lends itself to a more peaceful, reflective imagery and hope that the future will bring happiness, a deep happiness of understanding, satisfaction and unconditional love.

In “The Dead” the protagonist Gabriel Conroy used his speech to point out some of the observations he made in connection to contemporary Dublin. Gabriel is concerned about coming new generations. Gabriel is educated, but lacks empathy. Regardless, his fears show the moment of self-reflection: “Sometimes I fear that this new generation, educated or hypereducated will lack those qualities of humanity, of hospitality, of kindly humour which belonged to an older day” (106). Gabriel perceives changes around him in the society, but the lack of empathy prevents him to accept some of those changes. He questions new values with universal ones.

The world of Gabriel Conroy is a fragile one, the world of a genteel middle class which avoids the tragedies and loss of the Irish past while sidestepping the questions of Miss Ivors about Ireland’s future. Stuck in denial Gabriel is a romantic at heart which can be seen in the speech prepared by him for the evening. Gabriel, being the narcissistic, self-deceiving person, virtually self-destructs before our very eyes. Suddenly, we are reminded that Gabriel is incapable of looking outside himself. Listening to his wife’s touchingly poignant memory of the death of her childhood lover, he only interprets it as an attack on himself. His “love,” or rather “lust,” for his wife turns to what are, for him, the more familiar emotions of anger and frustration. Unable to see beyond his own personal self, Gabriel lacks the empathy to truly comfort his wife at a moment when doing so would, no doubt, could have given a new beginning to their dying conjugal relationship.

While Dublin is full of eclectic lives and personalities, nearly all of the protagonists and characters created in the short story collection *Dubliners* by James Joyce express the desire to escape and break the shackles of mechanical, meaningless and purposeless unhappy life. That desire is fuelled not only by the monotony of routine, but also by the desire to do something greater, the desire to flee the bleak political landscape and the hope of starting anew. Joyce was trying to show people of Dublin that if they did not make a change and move on then they will forever remain in the state of paralysis with no hope of a bright future.

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